

The Oom-Ta-Tas Come Into Their Own

By JOHN B. WALLACE

THE town band was ready to begin its weekly rehearsal in the dingy loft over the hardware store. The alto player, who was also the secretary and librarian, had passed out the music and the boys had turned to number seven in the blue book, one of George Southwell's immortal compositions.

The leader, who when not directing harmony was the pharmacist in the local drug store, tapped on his music rack with his baton and glanced impatiently around the rude benches upon which the musicians were seated.

"Now where in the name of Heaven is that condemned snare drummer?" he peevishly inquired. "That boy is always late. No brains at all."

"Of course not," agreed the baritone player. "If he had any brains he wouldn't be a good snare drummer."

I really am going to treat this subject seriously because it is a subject worthy of serious treatment. The small town amateur band is not only the most typical institution of our democracy today but it is the corner stone upon which our national musical edifice of the future will be built.

Men who play in amateur bands are actuated by a number of motives. Some of them, especially the younger generation, are impelled by a desire to show off, to parade around before their fair friends in a uniform.

Others, principally the married members, seize the opportunity as a respite from the family circle which in long winter evenings is apt to pall upon one with a fertile imagination and an active temperament. But behind it all, young and old members alike, is an inherent love of music, a desire to bring forth harmony which must find expression even through the medium of a column of air propelled through a horn.

Nearly every small-town band has its hopeless dub, an individual who could never learn to produce a musical tone or execute a measure properly if he lived for a thousand years. But the band will put up with him, allow him to hold them back, for a band like a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, because they recognize within him, despite his inability to bring it forth, a craving for musical expression. And besides, it is almost impossible to get rid of one of these lads short of actual deportation. I remember one band that disbanded and reorganized five times in an effort to freeze out a would-be trombone player but they finally had to give it up as his uncle owned the only building in town that could be used for rehearsals.

The members certainly cannot be accused of belonging to a small-town band for pecuniary reasons. As a rule they are not only compelled to buy their own instruments, their uniforms and music but often they dig down in their pockets to pay their leader if it so happen that he be an outside professional. Upon every public occasion they are expected to turn out gratis. If they should have the temerity to demand a small honorarium upon such occasions as Decoration Day and the Fourth of July they are denounced as lacking in patriotism and public spirit and the committee selects a chorus from the high school to furnish the music.

Sometimes the band by giving entertainments and concerts is able to raise enough money to purchase uniforms without drawing upon the personal funds of its members. This, however, is only at the sacrifice of its independence, for from then on every person in town who bought a two-bit ticket feels at liberty to call out the boys for each wedding, funeral or similar festival that takes place for the next decade.

Dances are usually the most prolific source of revenue for the band boys but even here they are apt to run against a strong sentiment of opposition from the churches. There was a time in the not distant past when the church looked with strong suspicion on anyone who played a horn. He was suspected—sometimes not without reason—of having rakish tendencies and of being inclined toward taking a hand at seven-up or shooting a game of pool.

But the old order has changed. Since Billy Sunday started rampaging around the country preaching hell fire and damnation to the accompaniment of a slide trombone, the churches have taken a different attitude toward the band boys. The church or Sunday school that does not have its orchestra with a liberal sprinkling of brass is the exception. The preachers now are our best friends. They invite us to play in their churches and they boost vociferously for our concerts.

Political campaigns sometimes afford the town band a chance to get its hands on some real money. Candidates with a large sack and an open heart will engage the Silver Cornet Band to play in front of the town hall in order to draw a crowd for the subsequent rally. These windfalls are none too plentiful and furthermore the boys have learned from bitter experience to demand their money in advance.

Politicians are notorious for their short memories. The defeated candidate after election feels that settling for unpaid campaign expenses is too much like paying for a dead horse while the successful ones once safely

settled in office are inclined to let some one else do the worrying.

The band in a small town takes the place of a social club. Drawn together by their common love of music it exercises even a stronger tie than does the fraternal order or lodge over its members. A man will miss meeting after meeting of his secret order but he cannot miss many band rehearsals and remain a member of the organization. He takes no oath but there is an unexpressed obligation which few men will disregard. Here both duty and inclination call him.

The small-town band has more than a sprinkling of the live wires of the community. There are always a few members whose only bid for recognition is their ability to perform upon their chosen instrument but the majority are what might be called all around good citizens perhaps a little above the average run in intelligence. There you will find the cashier of the bank manipulating the keys of a clarinet, the dentist drawing soulful sounds from a flute, the rising young attorney blowing a cornet, the butcher puffing into a tuba and the town barber pecking away on an alto.



Top—Geary Avenue grammar school band, Pomona, California. None of the boys in this band are more than 13 years of age. Center—High school band at Chaffey Union High School, Ontario, California. Bottom—Upland Band at Upland, California, a town of 2,000 inhabitants that has one of the best amateur bands in the state. Four members were absent when this photo was taken.

Many a suggestion for the improvement of the community is made and got under way at band practice. In many ways the band functions as a local commercial club or business men's association. This is recognized in the almost universal custom of judging the progressiveness of a town by the size and ability of its band.

Another element that adds freshness and life to a small-town band is the wandering musician, the drifter. Ability to play a horn or a reed instrument is a distinct asset. It often lands a man a job where otherwise he would be kicked out as a hobo. There is always room in a small-town band for another player. Let the stranger venture into the hall on rehearsal night and let his talent be known and every man in the band constitutes himself a committee of one to locate the visitor a good paying job. There is a freemasonry among bandmen that perhaps does not exist as strongly in any other craft or profession.

These men with their tales of travel and experiences in other bands are a new source of entertainment to their fellows. Usually they remain a season and then drift on again. Sometimes they meet town girls who capture their hearts and they marry and settle down into staid and substantial citizens. Occasionally they abuse the confidence and trust placed in them and, after borrowing right and left, skip out leaving a trail of I. O. U.'s behind them.

The influence of the town band upon the music of the country is little realized by those who have not

given the question thought. A study of the records of the big music and instrument houses of the country would give you a better idea of what I mean. In the world of music, the town band bears the same relation to the professional as the sand-lotter in baseball bears to the big-leaguer. If it were not for the corner lot development of the ball player there would be few players in the big leagues today. And if it were not for the small-town band our professional ranks would have to be entirely recruited from the musicians of Italy, Germany and France. I have no quarrel with these foreigners. They have exercised a splendid influence over the music of this country. We owe them more than we can ever repay. But it is not to them we must look for the development of our national music; it is to the American-born musician, the product of our own environment and institutions.

The small-town band not only develops players of strictly band instruments but it has a strong influence in the advancement of string and the voice. Every town that has a band has an orchestra and the latter is usually composed largely of band members many of whom double in string. Every youngster that shows talent on violin or piano or reveals a voice of unusual quality comes under the notice of these men. The advice, encouragement and oft-times financial assistance given these youngsters and given at the crucial time when a wrong step might mean the blasting of a career, has been the making of many a star in the musical firmament.

These men, too, are the backers and boosters of all high-class musical entertainment in their own town and organize the excursions for the purpose of hearing grand opera and noted concert singers and players in near-by cities. Through their efforts and influence, the musical taste of America is slowly but surely being raised.

This statement may not seem to accord with the present craze for jazz but it is a fact nevertheless. I am not one of the Puritan highbrows who elevate their digits in holy horror whenever jazz is mentioned. Syncopation has been used by some of our greatest composers. It is centuries old. It has a recognized place in music. It is only when it is carried to the extreme, run into the ground as it were, that it becomes distasteful. We must remember that the chief value of music lies in its interpretation of moods. Our fad for jazz today is but the expression of a certain mood of the American people. Fed up on the horror and tragedy of war they have turned to the sonorous barbarism of jazz. But jazz is not the true expression of our national temperament, and it will pass with the passing of the mood that it expresses.

Just as America is made up of a composite of all the nations of the earth, so will our music be a composite. But it will be a composite that will possess an individuality of its own that will make it recognizable as American wherever it is heard. Glance at the program at the next concert of your home-town band. Note the diversity of selections. You will see composers of every nationality represented. The grade of the music will be determined by the ability of the performers and the experience of the leader but the program will be cosmopolitan. The small-town musician is your true internationalist. He takes the best in music from all countries. In this respect racial prejudice does not exist. During the World War, in deference to the sentiment against German music, very few bands put any Teutonic numbers upon their programs. But every true musician—loyal patriot as he was—in his heart secretly resented this concession to prejudice. He felt that music had no national or sectional boundaries and that every great composition, like every great painting or great piece of literature, belongs to the world.

As illustrating the catholicism and the high grade of music now being played in the small towns of the country, take these two programs selected at random from a list of summer concerts. The first program was played by a band of eighteen men, all amateurs, living in a town of less than three thousand inhabitants.

March—"Canton Halifax"	Hall
Sextette from "Lucia"	Donizetti
Waltz—"Civilization"	Pestalozza
Fantasia—"Old Kentucky Home"	Dalby
—Intermission—	
March—"The Conquest"	Alexander
Grand Selection from "Robin Hood"	De Koven
Patrol—"Salvation Army"	Herman
Selection—"War Songs of the Boys in Blue"	Tobani
Star Spangled Banner	
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